New York
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1950

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of June 5, 1950*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN · NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
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"The Show-Off"

DAILY NEWS

June 1, 1950

Arena-Type Theatre Gets Off to A Nice Start With 'The Show-Off'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

No better choice could have been made than George Kelly's comedy, "The Show-Off," as an introduction of the arena style of theatre to New Yorkers. It still is a shrewd, well made and funny play, and it is recognizably human enough to be called folksy. With Lee Tracy and Jane Seymour giving good performances, "The Show-Off" got the Arena off to a pleasant start last evening.

The Arena is the ground-floor ballroom of the Hotel Edison. Just go through the revolving door and when you come to a sign saying "Gentlemen" turn right, and there, you will find a platform about 25 feet square in the middle of the ballroom floor. On the platform are a carpet, a round center table, some chairs, a sofa and a chest of drawers. That is the stage for this so-called theatre-in-the-round, although the platform is square.

Banked around the stage are a few rows of ordinary, armless chairs—enough for about 500 people. Those in the four front rows are close enough to give an actor a swift kick in the pants without having to stand up, should such discipline ever become necessary, and those in the back rows are not much farther away.

One Gets Used to It.

There is considerable novelty in such a setup, obviously. For a moment it is astonishing to be so close to an actor while he's working. For the next two or three moments it is at least astonishing and perhaps shocking to discover that one can also see the faces of three-quarters of the audience on the other three sides, and to notice who is chewing gum.

Then, suddenly and simply, the play and the players take hold. Since the actors are imagining where they are—one side of the square stage obviously is a window looking out on the street, and on the other side above the sofa is a mirror, and two ramps leading to corners of the ballroom lead to the front door and upstairs or to the kitchen and the back door—well, as I was saying, since the actors are imagining this it is no trick at all to go along with them and imagine it, too.

George Kelly wrote his long character sketch, "The Show-Off," in 1924. It wears well, being basically human and skillfully humorous. Mr. Tracy's title role is that of a back-slapping loud-mouthed, wrongfully boastful no-account whom one comes to like, somehow, despite all his faults. Mr. Tracy's performance is quite admirable, and skillfully pitched for intimate surroundings.

Pleasant Summer Fare.

The performance I liked best last evening was that of Jane Seymour as Mr. Tracy's long-suffering mother-in-law. I felt that she, more than the others of a nice company, was completely at home on the square platform, sitting in a rocking chair and knitting and making dry cracks as if she were right in her own living room.

I don't mean that the other players, including Carmen Mathews, Frances Waller, Joseph Holland, Archie Smith and Dudley Sadler, were ill at ease. Under Martin Manulis' direction they were taking the arena type of theatre as a matter of course. It just happened that Miss Seymour was giving an excellent performance.

The Arena should make for pleasant Summertime playgoing, with a change of bill every once in a while—if the prices are not too high and if they take the noise out of the air-conditioning system.

"THE SHOW-OFF"

Comedy by George Kelly; staged by Martin Manulis; costumes by Beulah Frankel; presented by David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas, assisted by Catherine Lynn, at the Arena in the Hotel Edison, May 31, 1950. The cast:

Clara.....Carmen Mathews
Mrs. Fisher.....Jane Seymour
Amy.....Frances Waller
Frank Hyland...Joseph Holland
Aubrey Piper.....Lee Tracy
Mr. Fisher..Walter Cartwright
Joe.....Archie Smith
Mr. Gill.....Howard Wendell
Mr. Rogers.....Dudley Sadler

Synopsis: The scene is the front room of the Fishers' home in North Philadelphia. The time is 1924. Act I. An evening in May. Act II. Late afternoon, six months later. Act III. Afternoon, a week later.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

June 1, 1950

'Show-Off' Tests Arena Staging

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Broadway got its first full-fledged taste of theater in the round last night when a revival of "The Show-Off," George Kelly's hit of the Twenties, opened in The Arena in the Edison Hotel.

The occasion brought to light a great many elements of this type of staging which it would be impossible to conceive of, until one had such a production in action before him. For a number of reasons, this cannot be called an entirely happy occasion, but it certainly proved stimulating for what potentials it suggested for the project at large.

The play itself is securely dated. Its facts and atmosphere are as true now as ever, but the attack on the material as dramatic fare lacks any real objective, other than realistically to portray the home life of some supremely ordinary people.

In-Law Troubles.

A superficial young girl, opposed by her family, marries a noisy, lying blowhard. Just when he appears to have disgraced the family by his exhibitionism, it develops that he has bluffed a manufacturer into giving his young brother-in-law a huge sum of money for an invention.

The prospect is a dour one for his mother-in-law, who has allowed him to move in with her to live, for she knows that there will be no quieting him from now on.

There is a peculiar arbitrariness about the play that makes it truthful and somewhat pointless. It proves nothing, unless it is the sardonic theory that phonies can win. Despite frequent amusing lines and situations, it is not essentially comic enough to exist solely for its humor.

Actually it is a cranky play about dull people, and the fact that it is all real does not make it necessarily good theater.

As a literal play, "The Show-Off" seemed apt for use on a stage surrounded by audience. But it requires a peculiarly intimate and subtle kind of acting to survive so close to onlookers, and it seems unlikely that such a style can be achieved in the time permitted by the Arena's production schedule.

Short Title Role.

Lee Tracy is starred in the title role, which turns out to be surprisingly short, though it dominates the play. As a volatile actor, he manages easily to keep the attention of the whole circle of his audience. In this, his first try at arena acting, though, he is relying often on effects which would make sure points 20 yards away, but at a couple of feet seem external contrivances.

Jane Seymour as his mother-in-law has the biggest part in the play, and it is all to her credit that she can get away with criticizing his jabber, when she talks constantly herself. In posture and attitude she is remarkable, and she plays with consistent simplicity what is an extremely simple woman.

Most successful of the cast for this chummy type drama is Carmen Mathews as the Show-Off's sister-in-law. In describing her own rather bloodless marriage, and in calmly taking over from her mother and sister, she strikes a rare note of conviction. One suspects that the method she uses emphasizes thought on what she is saying, rather than any external expression.

Archie Smith has a similar honesty and privacy of emotion in his short role of the young inventor who gets $100,000 via the Show-Off's interference.

Frances Waller is attractive and trifling as the leading character's young disillusioned wife.

The current production is a most interesting introduction to The Arena, not because it is so successful, but because it is so revealing of what this sort of theater can or must be.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
June 1, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Old Wine in a New Bottle

A TRICKY revival of George Kelly's comedy, "The Show-Off," has brought the season to a colorful climax at the Arena, formerly the ballroom of the Hotel Edison. Employing the theater-in-the-round technique which has flourished in the hinterland, the production permits spectators to rub shoulders with the players as the former flank the action on four sides. The mode of presentation makes for a fascinating, if somewhat startling one-ring circus. Actually it makes very little difference to the texture of a fine play of a quarter of a century ago, nor to a superb portrayal of the title role by Lee Tracy.

* * *

Far more important than the arena device is the fact that Kelly's work retains heart, flavor and humor, with or without a proscenium and curtain. The tale of a Philadelphia braggart who raises pandemonium in a staid middle-class family is at once rueful and uproarious. With Jane Seymour and Carmen Mathews supporting the star with immense authority, it comes to glowing life again on Forty-seventh Street. Tracy, who played a lesser role in the original 1924 production, endows the character of Aubrey Piper with exactly the right proportions of intolerable swaggering and sympathy, and Martin Manulis has directed the scenes adeptly.

* * *

As for theater-in-the-round, it has good and bad aspects. Certainly it heightens the play-goer's illusion that he is actually participating in a dramatic projection, even when he is frequently looking at the backs of the performers. At the same time it has a certain merry-go-round effect that is definitely wearing on the neck muscles as actors troop down the aisles onto the stage and move around rather arbitrarily to allow the customers grouped around them to view the nuances of particular passages. "The Show-Off" was not a particularly happy choice for an interesting mechanical experiment on Broadway.

It is more to the credit of Manulis and the company that they have pulled off the stunt as handsomely as they have. Miss Seymour is wonderfully irascible as the unwilling mother-in-law of a prevaricating nut, while achieving moments of genuine pathos when her husband dies. Miss Mathews is not far behind her in the part of the unloved Clara, who understands the show-off better than any one, and Frances Waller and Archie Smith are good in lesser assignments. Incidentally the skimpy decor by Beulah Frankel is adroit and for those who like to refresh themselves between acts, the bar is right on top of the seats. But "The Show-Off" is distinguished for a staunch revival of a durable drama, rather than for its manipulations.

Daily Mirror
June 1, 1950

'Show-Off' First Rate In 'Arena' Production

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Theatre-in-the-round came to New York last evening, when David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas revived George Kelly's "The Show-Off" in The Arena, a former night club in the Edison Hotel. The audience of several hundreds was seated on all four sides of a small center stage. The chairs were tiered to give everyone a good view.

The arena or penthouse production technique was first popularized by Prof. Glenn Hughes at the famous Penthouse Theatre, University of Washington, Seattle. It is now sweeping the country. Currently, it is the hottest thing in show business. But this is the first opportunity New Yorkers have had to study it in action.

The Kelly comedy remains first-rate. It has survived the years wonderfully well. It is human, wise and witty. It is one of the best plays written by an American. Personally, we think the Pulitzer Prize Committee should have given it their award rather than Kelly's more serious, pretentious "Craig's Wife."

"The Show-Off," you may recall, has to do with a well meaning clerk in the offices of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Philadelphia, who has delusions of grandeur and an amazing ability to sell them to the gullible. But smarties see right through him. However, he is such an amiable phony that he wins friends and even influences people, his acidulous mother-in-law excepted.

For their novel presentation, Heilweil and Lynn-Thomas have assembled an excellent cast. Lee Tracy is a fine type for the title role. He wins great sympathy for the brassy and breezy clerk, though he misses some of the harder edges of the characterization.

Jane Seymour, Carmen Mathews and Frances Waller are perfect as his willing and unwilling victims, and there are noteworthy contributions by Joseph Holland, Walter Cartwright, Archie Smith, Howard Wendell and Dudley Sadler.

The first-nighters seemed to be impressed by the novel method of production.

The New York Times
June 1, 1950

Arena Type Staging Reaches Broadway With Lee Tracy in Kelly's 'The Show-Off' at the Hotel Edison

By BROOKS ATKINSON

There is nothing wrong with the arena type of staging, as theatre people in other parts of the country already know. Using George Kelly's "The Show-Off" as their first production, David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas have established an arena type of theatre in the former ballroom of the Edison Hotel, where Lee Tracy acted the part of the braggart Aubrey Piper last evening.

The stage is a low platform in the center of a large room, and banks of seats surround it. There is no scenery, but there are the necessary props to indicate the living room of a commonplace house in North Philadelphia. The lighting comes from above. About thirty seconds after the play has begun, arena or central staging seems normal, except that it is a little more familiar than proscenium staging generally permits. At the moment, it is a novelty, but it is useful and practical and ought to become an integral part of the working theatre in a week or two.

* * *

It cannot make a weak play look stronger than it is. Even when it is acted with spirit by an excellent cast, Mr. Kelly's comedy about a noisy charlatan is not as pithy as it used to be. A quarter of a century ago it was satire in the mood of "Main Street," which had just discovered the comedy in familiar American life. Aubrey Piper was a caricature of an American type that "Red" Lewis, Mencken and Nathan had been boisterously belaboring.

Since "the Show-Off" is well written by one of our most skillful craftsmen, it still has a certain amount of vitality, particularly in the last act, when the plot catches up with the characterization; and some of the dialogue is still amusing. But Aubrey Piper, the tencent blow-hard, is a faintly boring fellow now. Some of the things that were satire a quarter of a century ago are no longer so bright and amusing. Now that the psychoanalysts have taken over the bores, the wits have to look for fresher subjects.

Under Martin Manulis' direction, the performance is expert. Mr. Tracy, who meekly played the amiable brother in the original production, now plays the bombastic Aubrey with gusto and sharpness. As the skeptical mother-in-law, who is the more comic character today, Jane Seymour has the best part that has come her way for some time and, logically enough, she is giving her best performance. It is simple in style, but amusingly petulant in manner.

* * *

Carmen Mathews and Frances Waller play the parts of the two sisters with spirit. Walter Cartwright as the crotchety father; Joseph Holland as the tolerant but distraught brother-in-law, and Archie Smith as the good-tempered son—act the other principal parts agreeably.

The Arena is a disarming variation on the form of theatre. But Mr. Kelly's cartoon out of another era is only mildly diverting now.